The Story Images Tell: Afghanistan in 2008

An exploration of images of conflict in the Middle East and
who and what can influence the interpretation of these images.

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How do images become defining for historical events or become iconic representations of a period of time?

- Robert Capa's images of war

- Death of a Spanish loyalist militiaman. Córdoba, Spain. September, 1936.

- Robert Capa/International Center of Photography/Magnum Photos

- Images from 9/11 and of Afghanistan

- A firefighter moves through piles of debris at the site of the World Trade Center in New York, Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001.

- AP Photo/Graham Morrison

- Nick Ut's image from the Vietnam War

- "South Vietnamese forces follow terrified children, including 9-year-old Kim Phuc, center, as they run down Route 1 near Trang Bang after an aerial napalm attack on suspected Viet Cong hiding places on June 8, 1972. A South Vietnamese plane accidentally dropped its flaming napalm on South Vietnamese troops and civilians, and the terrified girl had ripped off her burning clothes while fleeing."

- AP Photo/Nick Ut

I feel drawn to looking at images and news about conflict in the Middle East and the so-called War On Terror because it is something that the United States has been involved in throughout my entire life. I was born in January 2001 so I was only about nine months old when 9/11 happened, but war in the middle east is all I've ever known. At the same time, I never really understood why there was a war and what exactly was going on, and this is something I am still working on. The 9/11 attacks were discussed when I was in school, but the teachers did not provide much context for the attack. Maybe I just don't remember if they gave any context, but when going through so many images of war, I felt some sort of responsibility to piece together the war on terror and how growing up with it has affected me.

So I began looking at images of the Korengal Valley of Afghanistan with some more specific questions in mind:

- What are the ethics of photojournalism and photographing war?

- What role do media companies and publishing companies play in what gets published?

- What role does the photographer play and what role does the individual or subject of the image play?

-How does the general public get images and how do they work to tell the story of war and the philosophical and ethical boundaries that apply.

This first set of images is from a photo story that Lynsey Addario, a photographer, talked about on a Radiolab podcast episode. And the podcast addresses a lot of the questions I am asking.

Basically, Addario created a large set of images that showed the story of a soldier's death and all that happened in an attempt to save him. Addario was attempting to create a photo spread for Time Magazine. She and the host discuss the process of getting these images published and how prior to being able to publish any, Addario needed consent from the family of the deceased soldier.

"Any photos that she had taken that included that soldier's face or any other identifying marks, like tattoos according to the rules of her embed, she couldn't use those photos without the soldier's permission" (Jad Abumrad, Radiolab Host 2021)

Addario had called the family and the father of the soldier said he wanted to see the images before he made a decision "And ultimately, he said no… He said no to any pictures with the face or identifying marks" (Addario)

So these images you see, the ones that were published are all the before pictures that lead up to the prayer after the soldier was lost.

Addario said towards the end of the podcast that "I will always feel like journalistically we sacrifice, we did not tell the story as powerfully as we could have. But we had integrity, and I feel like we treated everyone with respect, and we kept our word" (Addario).

Where is the line between having integrity and telling a story as powerful as it could be with the inclusion of the images? Where are all these images that were "not allowed" to be published?

It was situations like this that helped to guide my research. I wanted to figure out what story images told without the context of words or articles they were paired with.

The way most people get images today is through the internet or social media. It surrounds us, all day every day. But do you really even choose what media you consume? And are the images that are published and shared telling you the whole truth?
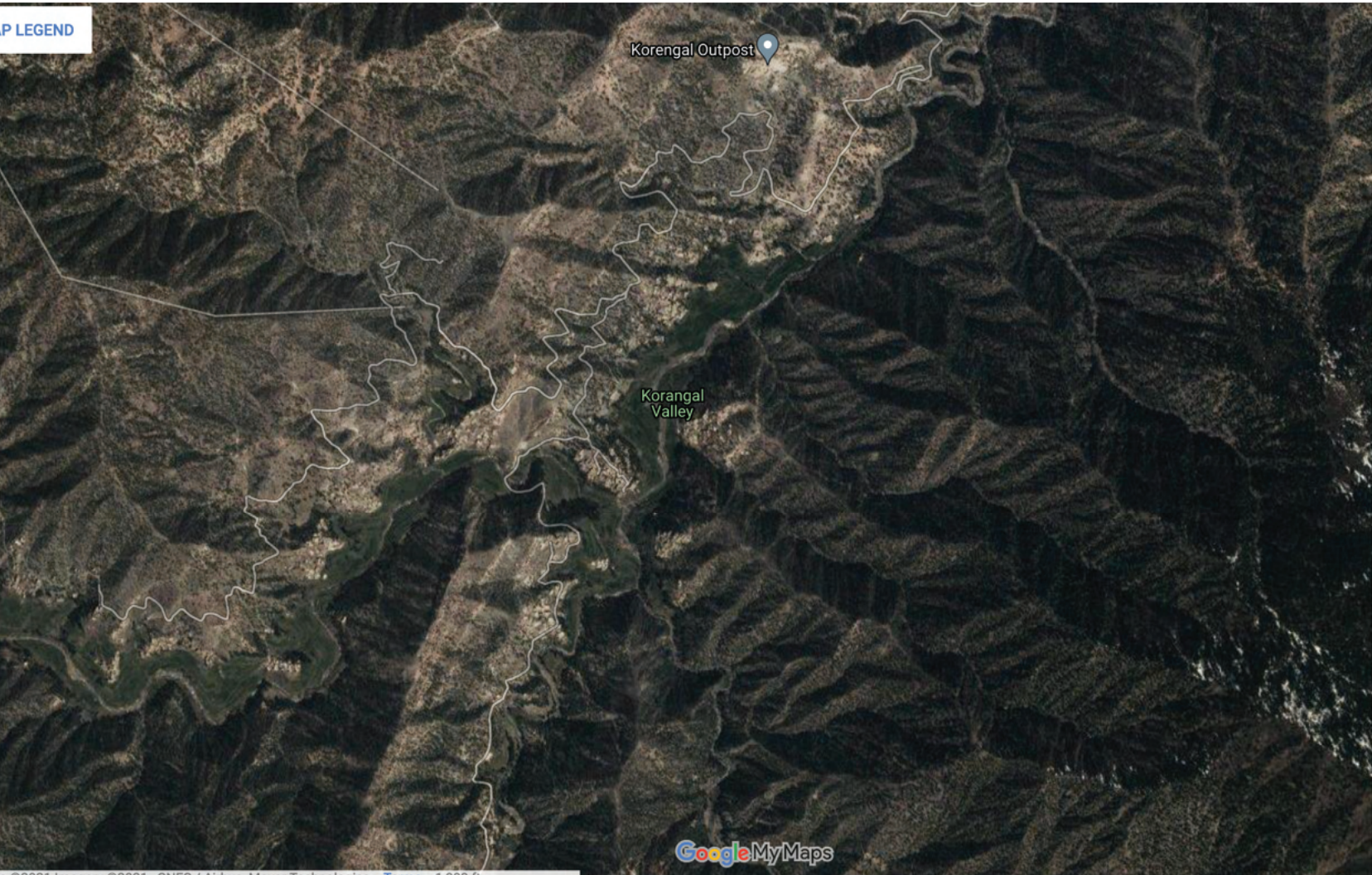
For some general background, this is what the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan looks like on google maps. The Korengal is considered "The Valley of Death" by many American soldiers. It is extremely desolate and removed from any large cities or towns and the United States lost over 50 men and hundreds have been wounded between the years of 2006 and 2009.

On Google Maps, there are also a set of images that you can view for specific locations, posted by people's personal accounts.

For example, the next three images are from the Korengal Valley and were within the first 10 images that were on Google Maps. How are these 10 images chosen?

Korengal Outpost   Ryan Morgan
Garangal, Afghanistan

Korengal Outpost   Chris Conrad   Garangal, Afghanistan

If you go to someone's profile there can be another entire set of images from the same location that google didn't initially show, but could there be even more than those?
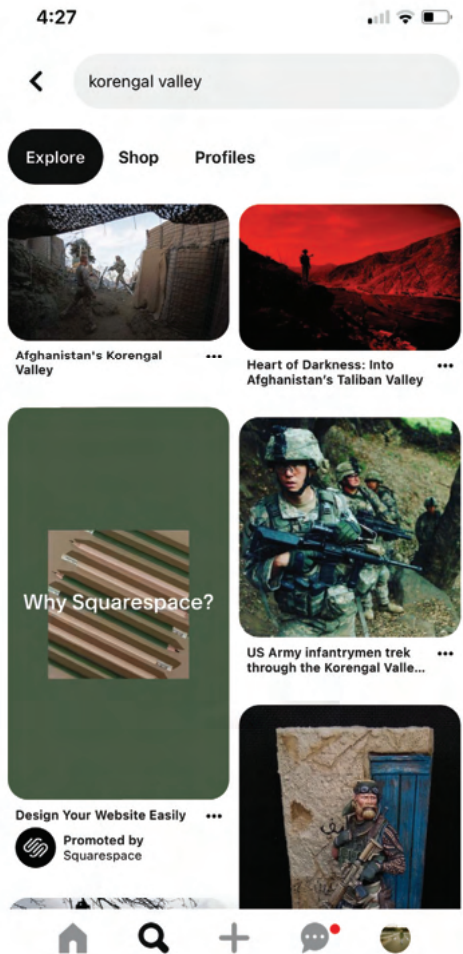
Korengal Outpost   Michael Olveda   Garangal, Afghanistan

All the initial images are the ones you're seemingly supposed to see. You've been allowed to see. Even if you have to do a little digging into someone's profile you can still find them. What happened to the ones you're not supposed to see? What story do those images tell?
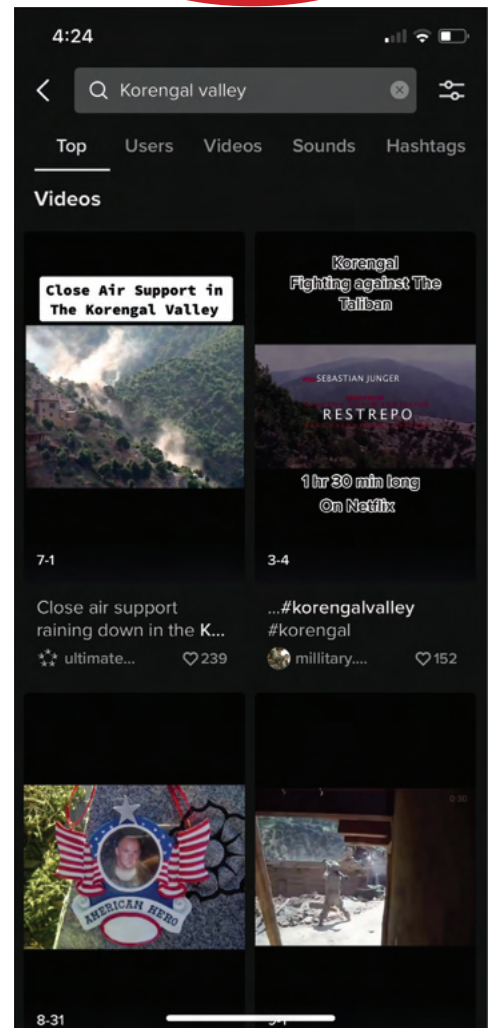
Facebook

Pinterest

Tiktok

Even on other social media sites like Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and Pinterest, the images that come up are curated for you based on the people and places you follow, the things you search for, and where you are in the world. I've searched on my social media "Korengal Valley" but how would your results compare?

Newspapers and publications are no different. Those images may be even more curated for public viewing. Images that may consist of content that advertisers won't want next to their ads do not get published. If images do not fit the story the writers are trying to tell they do not get published.

James Nachtwey said in 2001 that "Advertisers are tired of having their products displayed next to images of human tragedy. They feel that it somehow detracts from the saleability of their products and publishing war photographs has become more difficult as society becomes more obsessed with entertainment and celebrity and fashion" (James Nachtwey 2001).

Instagram

But how do we know the stories that are being published are truthful if companies' main focus is what creates the most utility for them, money?

Why do companies who pay for ad space get to dictate what we see and what we don't see with things unrelated to their company because of their purchase of ad space? Why are the elite employees of media companies and publications getting to decide what images are too horrific or too graphic for you, a free-thinking individual, to see?

Continuing to focus on the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan, the next three images are all from this valley in 2008 but all taken by different photographers.

The first image, taken by Lynsey Addario, shows U.S. troops carrying the body of a Staff Sgt. who was killed when the Taliban insurgents ambushed their squad in the Korengal Valley in 2008.

The second image, taken by Tim Hetherington as a part of his Sleeping Soldiers series, shows Sergeant Elliot Alcantara sleeping in July of 2008.

The last image was by John Moore and shows a 50 caliber machine gun pointing out towards an Afghan village on October 23, 2008, at the U.S. Army combat outpost Dallas located in the Korengal Valley.

All of these images were taken in the same year in relatively the same location but portray very different things. Even without the captions provided by the photographer, each image tells its own story, the story that the photographer wanted to tell. These images include the biases of the photographer whether it was intentional or not.

"Capturing reality is the mission of photojournalists. But the perception of reality is a personal and subjective issue… While looking through their viewfinders, photographers make conscious choices about what to include in the frame, what or who will be in the foreground, and what will be in the background" (Sharaf N. Rehman 2018).

All these things can change the way a viewer comprehends and understands an image. Historically, photography has been looked at as a primary source, it captures the reality of an event and its objective. But the photographer has a lot of play in who and what is included in the images and how it is included that can drastically change the meaning.

I have looked through several timelines of The War on Terror and not one of them was the same. Does anyone really what actually happened? Through my work, I wanted to reflect on 2008 in Afghanistan, reflect on the hundreds of images I looked at, the news articles and headlines I've read through, and where I was during that year. My goal is to explore how images of The War on Terror intersected with my life and experiences in 2008.

The War on Terror as a whole is, for me, this intangible dark cloud that comes in and out of view. It was in and out of the media spotlight throughout my entire childhood and now that the United States has pulled our troops out, is it over? What was it all even about? Through the following pieces, I attempt to reconstruct the events in Afghanistan and pair them with events in my childhood. It's confusing and although I have a better sense of the timeline now, it still doesn't all make sense. These remaining questions and confusion are what I show in my pieces through abstraction, variation of mark and texture, and the loose suggestion of figures and text.
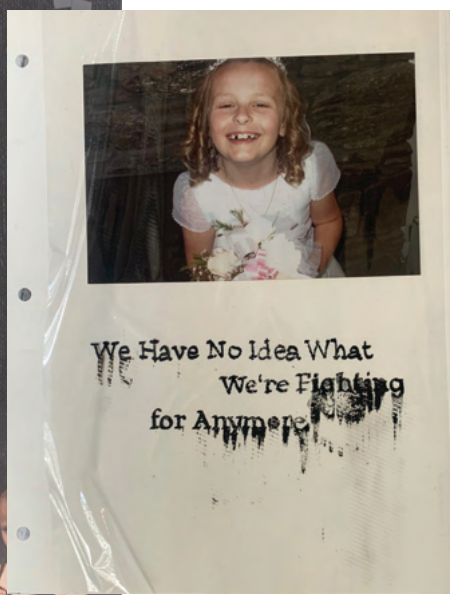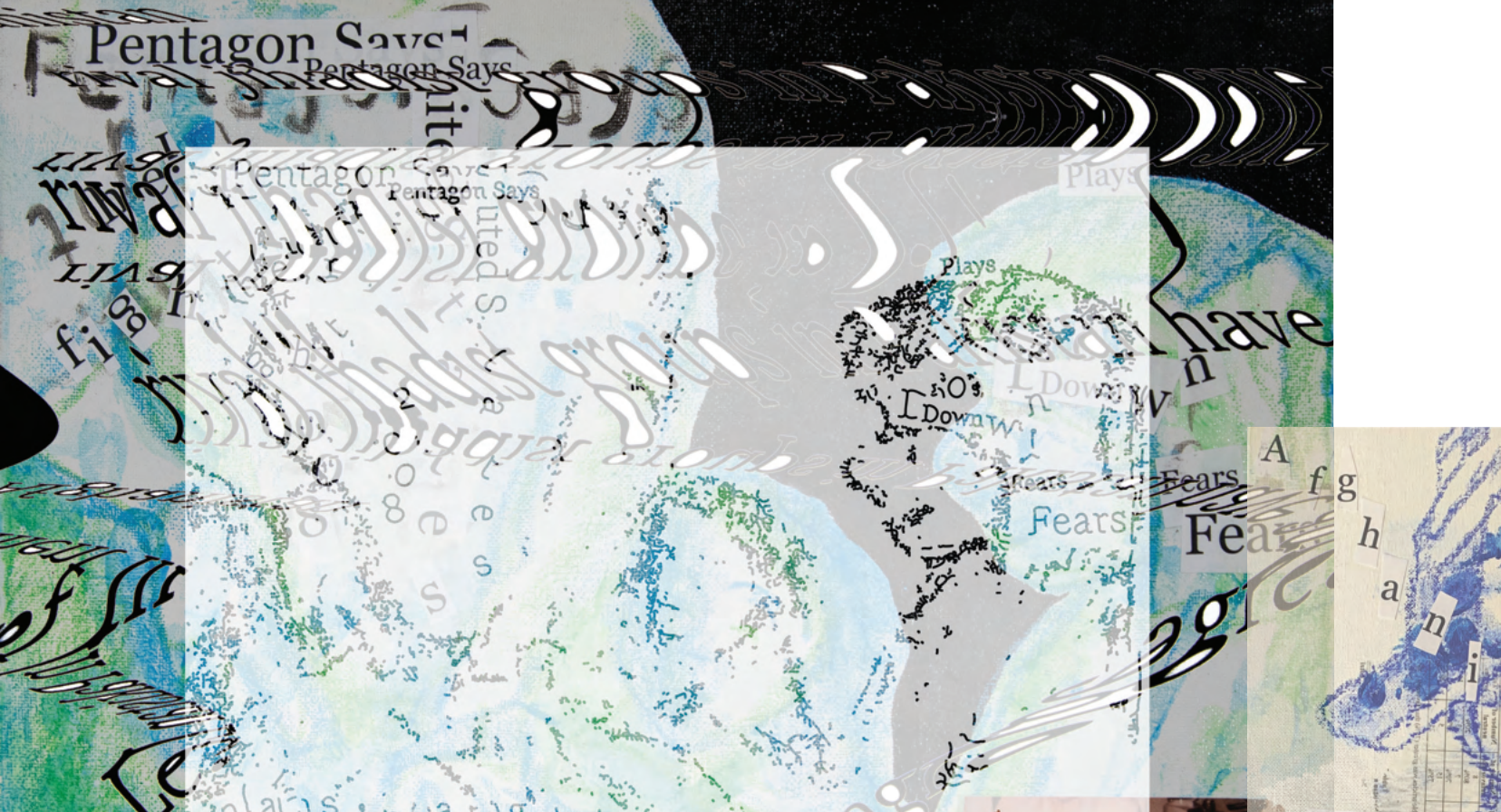
On the other hand, I wanted the pieces to have this sense of ambiguity and uncertainty. Who are the individuals within the work? Do they have any relation to the text? Is that relationship even important to the viewer? After researching how images can be read by a viewer and who controls what images are shown and what context they are placed in and what captions and articles and images are paired together and how that can change the meaning or intention of an image, I wanted to experiment with my own work and these pieces are the result of that.
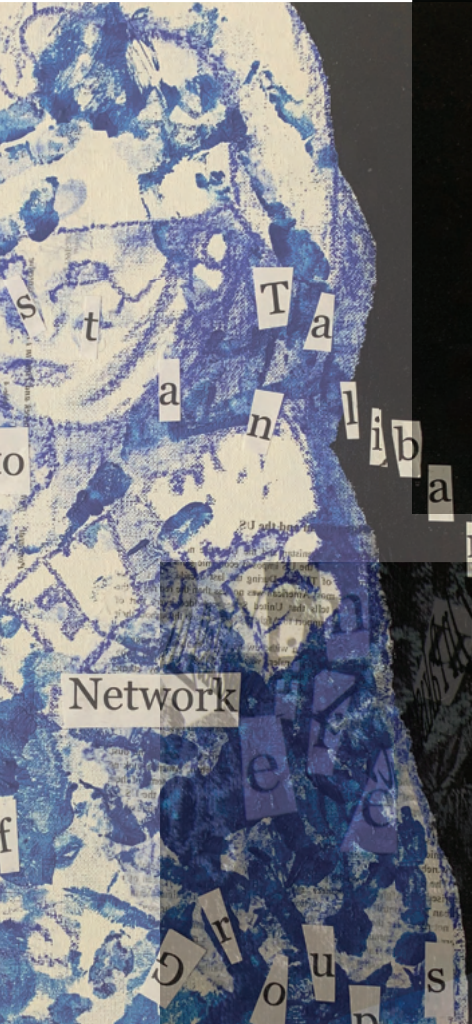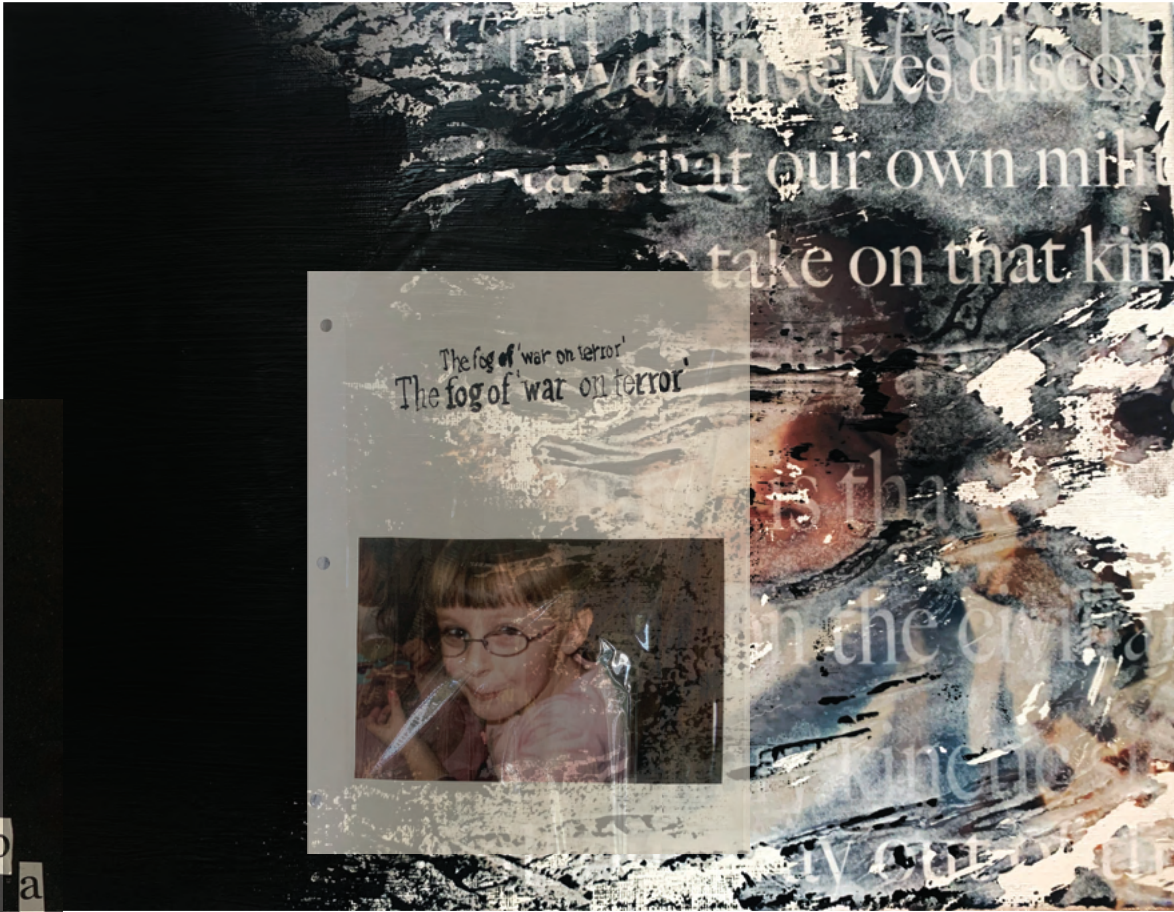
We are all stuck within a world of image overload and it's extremely hard to make sense of it and even acknowledge it at all. My work reflects this struggle as an artist to make meaningful work that not only acknowledges but reacts to the world around me and the world that I grew up in.